

God's Plan for Us! Ephesians 1:3-14

God's plan

I will begin today's sermon with some questions. Do you believe God exists? Yes. Do you believe God has a plan for you? Do you know God's plan for you? The first two questions are easy to answer, but the third question... maybe not.

Unlike non-believers, we, Christians, talk about God, God's will and plan. We believe God exists and God has a plan for us so we try to discern God's plan for us. Of course, discerning God's will or plan for us is not easy. When I worked at a Korean church in Boston, I served a young adults group. As young Christians, many of them struggled to discern God's calling and God's plan for them. They often said, "Pastor! I would like to know God's plan for me so that I can live my life as God desires. I pray to God to answer me but I still don't know what God has planned for my life."

I responded, "Hasn't God called you to be a pastor?" Their common answer was "No!" I replied, "then, God must be calling you to be a missionary in Africa. Don't you think so?" Of course, they said, "No!" Then, I told them, "isn't it amazing that you do not know God's plan for you, but you know exactly what God did not plan for you! Perhaps, you should make a list of possible callings from God and erase them one by one...to discern what doesn't seem like a calling from God. The last one left on that list will be God's plan for you!" What do you think? Isn't this a good way to find out God's plan for us?

Everything happens for a reason: the half truth

We believe that God has a plan for us. But this concept of God's plan has often been misused in the church. I don't know how many of you are interested in doctrine but I bet you have heard of predestination. Right? In the simplest summary, predestination is a doctrine in Calvinism in which God picked those whom he will save and bring with him to Heaven before the world was created. Today's text is often used to justify the premise of predestination. "He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world... 1:5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will." In this text, Paul sounds very much like a Calvinist.

Of course, we are United Methodists so we don't agree with this Calvinist understanding of predestination. John Wesley strongly opposed the doctrine of predestination. But more or less, we have internalized the same logic of predestination. Has anyone ever said to you, "Everything happens for a reason"? I bet most of us have heard this statement from someone at some point, or have said it to someone else at some point. We use this statement in response to suffering, seeking to console others. "When something bad has happened, with good intentions, we say, "It was meant to be." When someone dies unexpectedly, we often hear "It must have been their time" or "It was part of the plan" or "It must have been God's will." We seek to console others by saying that God has a particular purpose even for their suffering. Some assume "while we don't yet understand why it had to happen, all events in our lives unfold according to God's predetermined and immutable plan." (Half Truths, 18) Do you agree that everything happens for a reason and all events in our lives, good or bad, unfold according to God's predetermined plan?

As you see, I use my Ipad for worship services. My biggest fear in using my ipad during worship is the possibility that my ipad will suddenly freeze or stop working during the service. And my biggest fear actually happened at Zion last Sunday. Minutes before worship started, I

don't know why... but my ipad suddenly began a system upgrade and I couldn't see my worship manuscript. Fortunately, I had my cellphone so I was able to use it until my ipad restarted. If the same thing happened at Asbury, well... I would have been sweating bullets. Upgrading the system of my ipad right before the worship service is certainly not in my plan. Do you think God noticed that I haven't upgraded the system for a long time and for the security of the sermon, God willed my ipad to suddenly upgrade? Of course, not. In the same sense, God didn't will the condo in Florida to collapse. God didn't plan the Covid-19 pandemic or mass shootings at schools. God has a predestined plan for us but it's not a predetermined and immutable plan for every event in our lives. It's not God's plan to make a choice to save some and leave out others.

God has given us freedom to make choices, for better or worse. So when we do something wrong, we can't blame God. Many tragedies in the world have resulted from our sin and evil doings. For Christians, everything happening for a reason is only a half-truth.

Predestination vs Preventive Grace

Today's scripture tells us about God's plan. The message of it is that God predestined the world for love and this love is for all humanity. God didn't predestine who will be saved and who will be eternally damned. What the scripture witnesses to us is that God predestined Godself to love us no matter what. God's predestined plan has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ on the cross brought forth God's predestined plan for love, making it possible for believers to enjoy the blessings of God's Kin-dom. This is grace before we were born and this is preventive grace for us.

God's preventive grace is like a Father's love for his children. When his child is still in her mother's womb, the father already loves him or her. Hanna is here with her baby. Does Carlos love the baby? Before the baby is born, the father is destined to love his child. Because of this love that goes before us, all children learn to love others including their parents. This is preventive grace from God evidenced in parents. Because God loves us first, we can love God. And because God loves us, God gives us freedom to make our own choices, and allows us to fill up the pages of our lives. God invites us and guide us to walk on a right path, a way of life and love but God does not force us.

A loving Father guides and walks behind his children.

During the week, I visited Carl Bishop Sr. and I showed him pictures from my camping trip. Carl's family used to go camping in New Hampshire during the summer and the campground I went to on my vacation happen to be the same campground Carl's family used to go. Carl told me stories about his family at the campground.

The campground is on Lona Lake and his children, including Carl Jr. liked to swim in the lake. I have heard that Carl Jr. was a good swimmer and wanted to know how far he could swim so he decided to swim across the lake. [ppt] It's a big lake for me. I paddled about 20 minutes to across the lake. Carl Jr. wanted to swim across it. (How old were you Carl at that time?) It sounds dangerous. Right? But Carl Sr. said, "O.K. but just in case of emergency, I will get a boat and follow you." Carl Jr. didn't feel that was necessary but Carl Sr. followed him. After a couple of swims, Carl jr set a time record and challenged other kids to beat his time. None of the kids were able to beat his record until Ann, a neighbor girl, finally beat his record. Carl Sr. was about to pull the boat out of water when Carl Jr said, "Dad, get in the boat!" and the competition went on. As I listened to Carl Sr.'s story, I could glimpse how God's plan works for us.

Our God is not like an authoritative father who meticulously plans our life journey and forces us to follow all his rules. Rather, God gives us freedom to choose and allows us to enjoy our time in this world by being ourselves and being with others. Of course, there are dangers, so God guides us but still allows us adventure even into some dangerous terrain. God doesn't leave us alone but walks one step behind us, waiting for us and being ready to help us and accept us when we return to him.

I believe this is a real blessing for us. God doesn't make a tight camping schedule for us that we must follow. Rather, God wants us to enjoy his creation, companions we meet during our journey, and be a life-sharing community. God does not exclude anyone but wants everyone to join his life-giving and joy-filled family camping trip.

We are Asbury family. We are chosen, redeemed and sealed by God's grace and in some sense, we are planning and doing our camping trip with Christ. We know God's plan. God wants more people to join and enrich this life-giving journey. Let us give thanks to God and praise God as we share the gospel with our neighbors so that they may also know the joy of life in Christ. Amen.